

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE REFORMED FAITH

KOREA

South Korea, with a generously estimated six and a half million Presbyterians, is one of the five most Presbyterian and Reformed countries in the world, outranked in Presbyterian proportion (15.5%) of its population of 42 million only by Switzerland (40%), Scotland (38.5%), Holland (30%) and Hungary (19%). In sheer numbers of Presbyterians, however, by some counts it may well now rank first, ahead of the United States, Indonesia and South Africa.

But Korean Presbyterianism is very young, tracing back only to 1883/84. Its pioneer was a layman, So (Suh) Sang-Yoon, who was converted by Scottish missionaries in Manchuria and returned with Scripture portions to form a Christian group in his home village months before the first resident Protestant foreign missionary, Dr. Horace Allen, MD, also a Presbyterian layman, landed in September 1884. The next year the first Presbyterian clergyman arrived, Horace G. Underwood, along with the first Methodist missionaries. Though public preaching of Christianity was forbidden, Allen's medical skill won him permission to open a hospital in 1885, the first legally permitted Christian institution in Korea. The next year Underwood performed the first baptism of a Protestant on Korean soil, and in 1887 organized the first Presbyterian church.

The 1890s were years of expansion. Samuel A. Moffett opened up the northern interior, outside the treaty ports, to residential Protestant missionary presence, and by 1894/95 the first

significant explosions of church growth were noted ("the fire in the northwest"). Emphasis was on evangelism, but education was not neglected ("Plant a school with every church"). Presbyterian unity was considered a necessity. In 1893 the separate Presbyterian missions then at work (USA North and South, Australian and, later, Canadian) formed a Presbyterian Council to override their imported differences and work for the formation of one Presbyterian Church of Korea. They agreed on a strategy of Korean self-support, self-government and self-propagation, built on Bible study classes for all church members (the Nevius Method). In 1907 the first Korean presbytery was organized. It declared itself independent of foreign ecclesiastical connection and sent out its first Korean missionary. In 1912 the first General Assembly was formed, and sent its first missionaries to China.

The years of Japanese occupation (1905-1945) were difficult but the Great Korean Revival (1907-08) produced an inner Christian strength that survived persecution and produced the greatest Korean Christian leader of the period, Sun-Ju Kiel, the first ordained and installed Presbyterian minister. He was not only the outstanding preacher of the revival but also became one of Korea's foremost spokesman for national freedom in the 1919 Independence Movement.

By 1934 when Presbyterians celebrated fifty years of mission in Korea, there were a total of 153,000 Presbyterians (communicants 103,00, baptized infants 24,000, catechumens 26,000) in a total population of 20 million. That is a percentage of less than 1%, but it was equal to the Catholic percentage, and about five times as large as the Korean Methodist Church.

Now, half a century later (1990), the Reformed faith still dominates, but after the tragedy of the division of the country in 1945 into a communist north and a democratic south, it is almost exclusively limited to the south. Before 1945 about two-thirds of Korea's Protestants (mostly Presbyterian) were in the north. Now North Korea is one of the most publicly non-Christian countries on earth. Only very recently has the communist government ended its unremitting persecution and provided two small churches in the capital, one Protestant, the other Catholic. Some estimate there are also about 500 house churches surviving, with perhaps a total of 10,000 Christians.

In South Korea membership figures are probably exaggerated, but the 6 1/2 million Presbyterians are about three times as large as the Roman Catholic church, about six times as large as Methodists and Pentecostals, and nine times larger than Korean Evangelical Holiness, and Baptists. But Protestantism has become tragically divided, and Presbyterianism most of all.

This is a very recent phenomenon, dating back only to the Korea War in the 1950s, There are now at least 45 different Presbyterian denomination<sup>s</sup>. Two are very large with over a million and a half members each: the Presbyterian Church of Korea (T'ong-hap) which is ecumenical, and the Presbyterian Church of Korea (Hap-dong) which withdrew from the World Council of Churches in 1959. Two others report about half a million members each: the Conservative Hap-dong Presbyterian, and the Reformed Presbyterian. Both are fundamentalist and neither belong to the WCC. Two more are smaller, the ecumenical Presbyterian Church of the Republic of

Korea (300,000), and the strongly Calvinistic Koryu Presbyterian Church (175,000) which is not in the WCC. The rest are smaller splinter groups. The larger ones have restored some sense of cooperation through a Presbyterian Council of leaders which meets irregularly.

All however, are growing at a rate which continues to amaze. Like most third-world churches their theology is conservative. Their spirit is an independent-minded connectionalism. The influence of Presbyterian schools and universities is pervasive not only in the church but also in Korean society as a whole. And commensurate with membership growth is the expansion of Korean Presbyterian missionaries around the world from Nepal to Brazil and from Africa to Los Angeles. How the parallel growth of Korean economic affluence will affect all this remains to be seen.

-- Samuel Hugh Moffett  
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ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE REFORMED FAITH  
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Dr. Samuel Moffatt  
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Dear Dr. Moffatt,

I trust you received my recent communication seeking your participation in the Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith project I am editing. Since I wrote, my Consulting Editor, Dr. David Wright of the University of Edinburgh has asked that I contact you about doing another entry. It is on Korea as the enclosed Assignment Sheet indicates.

If you are willing to do the pieces on Evangelism and Korea, I would appreciate hearing from you with the signed forms.

Many thanks and all the best for your ongoing work.

Yours sincerely,



Donald K. McKim



